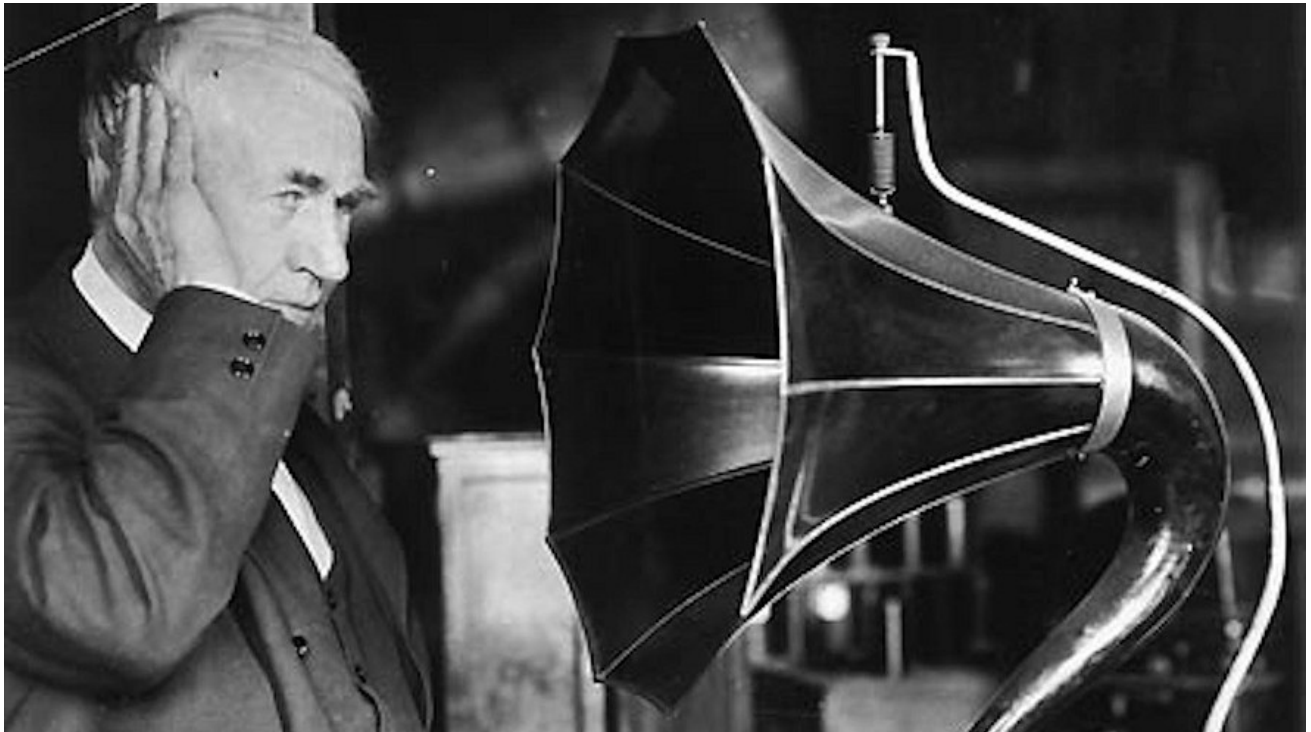


Time Machine (1921): Thomas Edison and American invention

By C.H. Claudy, Scientific American, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.22.16

Word Count **670**



Thomas Alva Edison, America's seventy-four-year-young inventor. Photo: Public Domain Image

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The famous inventor Thomas Edison just turned 74. Over the course of his amazing life, he helped to invent the lightbulb, the phonograph and motion pictures. These days, he is still hard at work, changing the world one invention at a time.

I sat down with Edison recently to discuss his life and achievements. We met in his office in Orange, New Jersey, where he works and sometimes sleeps. As I approached, he was bending, smiling, over a small paper packet. We shook hands, and he drew me over to look at it.

"Curious thing, the diamond," he said. "It's a good thing there are enough of them, or I should have to go out of business."

He was referring, of course, to the fact that diamonds are used for a key piece of the Edison phonograph, the machine he invented to record and play sound.

Before The iPod, There Was Edison's Phonograph

"Do you think of the phonograph as your greatest contribution to the world?" I asked him.

"Depends on how you mean 'greatest,'" responded Edison. "As a matter of pleasure, I suppose the phonograph has given a greater amount than anything I ever did." He admitted, though, that his work with lightbulbs was probably more important.

Edison said that he was still very interested in the phonograph. His interest in certain other projects, such as motion pictures, had lessened. Improving the phonograph, however, was still on his mind.

"The records are not perfect yet, but we get a little closer to perfection every time, and we never stop working on them." They might not be perfect, but phonograph records are pretty close. Edison said that the technology had gotten so good that people could no longer hear the difference between a live singer and a recording.

Before The Energizer Bunny, There Was Edison's Battery

Edison showed me the factory where his phonographs, records and batteries are made. A very large part of his plant is devoted to making batteries.

The public may not know much about the batteries. They are commonly used on trucks and trains, and for other purposes. Yet the battery he invented was revolutionary at the time. It continues to be so popular that the factory struggles to make enough to keep up with demand.

The Edison battery is practically indestructible, and it never wears out. It is lighter than other batteries, and in the long run, cheaper as well.

Edison noted that batteries help people rely less on gasoline. Gas is a useful fuel, but there is a limited amount of it. Batteries allow humans to store electricity made by other sources, such as coal and water power. Then they can use the energy stored in batteries whenever and wherever they choose.

Plenty Of Life And In Need Of Little Sleep

During World War I, Edison worked with the U.S. government to develop military technology. He spent two years in Washington, working day and night.

Edison's contributions were significant. He charted the time and place that American ships were attacked by German submarines. In this way, he figured out when and where a ship was safest from attack. The military used this information to send ships out of the way of submarines, saving many lives.

Edison seems to live for his work. He doesn't need much sleep, if any, and he can go without many of the comforts that most of us rely on. At the age of 74, he is still remarkably hardworking, alive and interested in what he is doing.

I spoke to his coworkers to get a sense of what they thought of Edison. The 7,000 men and women who work with him call him "the old man," I learned. They mean it with love. Mr. Edison has never been too busy to be human, and never too wrapped up in inventing a new machine to forget the needs of the people with whom he works.

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article BEST reveals Edison as a human as opposed to Edison as an inventor?
 - (A) Edison worked with the U.S. government to develop military technology.
 - (B) Edison said that the technology had gotten so good that people could no longer hear the difference between a live singer and a recording.
 - (C) The 7,000 men and women who work with him call him "the old man."
 - (D) Edison said that he was still very interested in the phonograph.

- 2 Which section reveals Edison's personal feelings about his inventions?
 - (A) the introduction [paragraphs 1-4]
 - (B) "Before The iPod, There Was Edison's Phonograph"
 - (C) "Before The Energizer Bunny, There Was Edison's Battery"
 - (D) "Plenty Of Life And In Need Of Little Sleep"

- 3 Select the paragraph from the section "Plenty of Life And In Need Of Little Sleep" that BEST states the main ideas of the article.

- 4 Which two of the following are MAIN ideas from the article?
 1. *Edison worked in Orange, New Jersey.*
 2. *Edison invented many useful items.*
 3. *Edison lived for his work.*
 4. *Edison used diamonds in his phonograph.*
 - (A) 1 and 2
 - (B) 2 and 3
 - (C) 2 and 4
 - (D) 3 and 4

Answer Key

- 1 Which sentence from the article BEST reveals Edison as a human as opposed to Edison as an inventor?
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 - (B) Edison said that the technology had gotten so good that people could no longer hear the difference between a live singer and a recording.
 - (C) The 7,000 men and women who work with him call him "the old man."**
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Paragraph 15:

Edison seems to live for his work. He doesn't need much sleep, if any, and he can go without many of the comforts that most of us rely on. At the age of 74, he is still remarkably hardworking, alive and interested in what he is doing.

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